

Rep. Lofgren Testifies on Vietnamese Human Rights

Washington, D.C. – Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose), testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight on the current human rights situation in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

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The full text Rep. Lofgren's full testimony is below.

Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren
U.S. Representative
16th District of California

"Human Rights Concerns in Vietnam"

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight on November 6, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Delahunt, for holding this important hearing on the deplorable human rights situation in Vietnam, and I thank you for this opportunity to testify before your subcommittee.

I have been a co-chair of the bipartisan Congressional Caucus on Vietnam for many years now. Despite what the current administration has said to the contrary, the human rights situation in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is now as bad or worse than it has been in previous years.

President Bush gave assurances to Congress last year that the passage of Permanent Normal Trade Relations with Vietnam would strengthen human rights. I, and 160 other members of Congress, opposed this bill. Our opposition surprised the Republican House leadership at the time, and Vietnam Permanent Normal Trade Relations was defeated the first time it came up. Unfortunately, it was brought up again and passed as part of a large omnibus package.

Ironically, at the time of these trade discussions, one of my constituents, American citizen Cong Thanh Do, was detained while vacationing in Vietnam with his family for writing pro-democracy articles on the internet from his home in San Jose, California. He was detained without charges for more than a month. The Administration was pressing to establish Permanent Normal Trade Relations with a country that was detaining one of its own for his free speech telling the truth

while in the United States.

Over the objection of many members, Congress approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations with Vietnam, and Vietnam subsequently joined the World Trade Organization in January. We have seen the disastrous consequences of these actions. We lost our leverage for human rights reform in Vietnam.

Vietnamese police, on March 6, 2007, arrested a pair of human-rights lawyers, Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, for organizing training sessions for political activists in the capital. There are many other dissidents who have been imprisoned simply for expressing their thoughts and attempting to practice their faith freely and openly. Nguyen Van Dai has since been convicted of disseminating propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and received a five-year sentence. Le Thi Cong Nhan was sentenced to four years.

A particularly troubling case was that of Le Quoc Quan, who was arrested on March 8th, the day he returned to Vietnam from his congressionally sponsored National Endowment for Democracy fellowship in the United States. His arrest was not only a human rights violation, it was a calculated insult to America and specifically to the United States Congress. He was released days before Vietnamese President Triet met with President Bush.

On July 18th, peaceful land reform protestors assembled in Ho Chi Minh City to express their disappointment with the Vietnamese government's policy of forced government land seizures. The Vietnamese responded to these peaceful protests with overwhelming force. Approximately 1,500 Vietnamese police were dispatched to break up a sit-in of 1,700 peasants. Reports indicated that approximately 30 peasants were severely injured through acts of violence by the police. I wrote to Vietnamese President Triet about this widely documented incident, and the response I received stated that "The complainants willingly dispersed themselves and there was no arrest or overreaction by the police." I can't say I'm surprised by the Vietnamese government's response. This is just one in a series of lies and whitewashes.

Vietnam claims it has made significant progress in allowing more freedom of religion, but this is simply untrue. Despite new laws that purport to allow registration of congregations and churches and a flood of applications, very few have been approved for legal operation. No real progress has been made.

The litany of human rights abuses by the Vietnamese are too many to mention here, but the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's report gives one an idea of the breadth of targets of the Vietnamese government. According to the report, "The Vietnamese government continues to remain suspicious of ethnic minority religious

groups, such as Montagnard and Hmong Protestants and Khmer Buddhists; those who seek to establish independent religious organizations, such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Hao Hoa, and Cao Dai; and those it considers to pose a threat to national solidarity or security, such as 'Dega' Protestants and individual Mennonite, Catholic, Buddhist, and house church Protestant leaders." I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record the Vietnam section of the 2007 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom report.

With all of the human rights problems in Vietnam, the question we must ask as policy makers is, "What can we do to help?" The United States has the power to influence Vietnam on these important human rights issues through the use of our many diplomatic and economic tools, but the president and Congress need to have the political will and moral courage to use them.

When the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom issued its yearly report on the status of religious freedoms in countries around the world, the commission made the same recommendation last year: Vietnam should be placed on the State Department's list of Countries of Particular Concern because of government repression of many religious believers. I believe it was a mistake for the Bush administration to take Vietnam off the list last fall. I have written letters to the president and Secretary Rice urging the administration to follow the recommendation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and redesignate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern.

I believe the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Michael Michalak, should provide financial support to the loved ones of the

political detainees, using the Human Rights Defender's fund. The wives of many of these political prisoners are left without any financial support. The United States has a moral commitment not just to the peaceful pro-human rights dissidents who have been imprisoned unjustly; we have a moral obligation to relieve the financial burden that these arrests have caused for the families of these brave defenders of freedom.

Trade is perhaps the best leverage we have, and I don't believe Congress and the president should have granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations without securing further progress on human rights in Vietnam. To correct that, I've introduced H. Res. 506, which states that we should "remove permanent normal trade relations status with Vietnam unless all political and religious prisoners are released and significant and immediate human rights reforms are made by the government of Vietnam."

Until the thugs in the Vietnamese government make real progress on human rights, I will continue to urge Congress and press this administration to stand up for the rights of the Vietnamese people to speak their minds and practice their faith.

Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren is serving her seventh term in Congress representing most of the City of San Jose and Santa Clara County. She serves as Chair of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. She also Chairs the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections and serves on the House Homeland Security Committee. Congresswoman Lofgren is Chair of the California Democratic Congressional Delegation consisting of 34 Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives from California.